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ABSTRACT

This paper presents journal entries from students at Singapore's National Institute of Education (NIE) during their first practice teaching experience at local elementary schools. The paper suggests that one of the best ways to help preservice teachers come to terms with their school experience is to encourage daily journal writing throughout the first-year practicum. The students' journal entries focus on the roles of cooperating teachers and their student teachers, classroom management, and gaps between NIE coursework and school practice. The journal entries provide a sense of how student teachers see their own roles and those of the teachers with whom they work. They also reveal student teachers' concerns about developing appropriate methods of classroom management and applying what they have learned at the NIE to real Singaporean classrooms. (SM)

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Learning from Narrative Accounts of the Practice Teaching Experience:

A View from Singapore

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Introduction

An important part of learning to teach is making sense of what happens in schools and classrooms. One of the ways in which we help our pre-service teachers come to terms with their school experience is to encourage daily journal writing throughout the first-year practicum. Practice teachers' journals provide a record of their reactions to schools, classrooms, teachers and students. They reveal the trainees' concerns about instructional strategies and classroom management. The journals also reveal how practice teachers come to examine the assumptions which underlie teaching and struggle to make links between what they have been taught at the university and their experiences in the classroom.

Because practice teachers' journals reveal their beliefs about and insights into teachers' roles, classroom practices, and the relationship of theory to practice, they provide principals and cooperating teachers (CTs), as well as university supervisors and lecturers, an 'inside view' of the practice teaching experience and the issues of concern to pre-service teachers. This in turn enables

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those involved to make improvements in the practice teaching component of the BA programme.

The following are fairly representative of journal entries by students at the National Institute of Education (NIE) during their first practice teaching experience in Singaporean primary schools.

Roles of cooperating teachers and practice teachers

1) My maths CT seems unwilling to give up her class to me. She said she wanted to continue teaching her class until the day when my supervisor will come to assess me. Thankfully, my social studies CT told her that that would defeat the purpose of my doing teaching practice. But she still says that she understands her class better and so it would be easier for her to teach them than for me to do it. She is unwilling to give up her teachers' guide so I had to borrow one from another practice teacher and photocopy it. And when I observed her class, she never bothered to ask the class to greet me. I wonder how her class will ever respect me when she does not seem to respect me at all.

2) I wanted to observe Mr. Lim's social studies class, but he told me that there was nothing to observe. Sometimes, he simply skims through social studies and spends the rest of the time on maths. So he said it would be better to observe one of the other teachers.

3) I tried again to get feedback on my lesson, but Miss Lee was always busy or talking to other colleagues. I did ask her what to do about the children who didn't complete their penmanship exercises, but instead of evaluating the situation with me, she just said, "Never mind. Leave it to me." It was the same when I wrote the class dictated story on mahjong paper last week. After the lesson, I asked her for feedback, but she did not tell me that it should have been written in bigger print. On Monday, I discovered a newly printed story with bolder and bigger print. She doesn't help me by giving me feedback, telling me my mistakes, giving me advice about what to do . . . she just takes over and does it herself.

4) My CT was absent three days this week and the staff coordinator put me in charge of all of her lessons. I had no time to prepare my own lessons properly as I was in class all the time. It made me realize that once you're on teaching practice, you're completely at the hands of your principal and your CT. You are at the mercy of them. You are, in a word, powerless. You come for TP without any knowledge of what your rights are, what you are supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do. And we don't even have a proper table here!

Classroom management

1) I was held up by Miss Goh after assembly. She told me that the pupils of P5 are very arrogant, so I need to be very firm with them. She also told me that I have to scold them and treat them like animals. I was stunned hearing this. She

believes very firmly that teachers have to be very strict with children or else they will not listen to you. Most of the teachers here have told me to be very fierce with the children and scold them when they are disobedient or make mistakes. My CT scolds the children rather harshly when they make mistakes. Should I follow her? Some of my pupils are very weak in their subjects. I want very much to encourage them rather than scold them. But I'm afraid they'll take advantage and climb on my head.

2) I feel kind of bad today after being fierce with my students. I think it was why they did not dare to answer my questions during the lesson. Now, getting them to respond is a problem. Is it possible to bring back the rapport without making classroom management chaotic? Only a fierce look can get them to hand up books, do corrections, etc. But this holds them back in discussion.

3) It's clear that Miss Loh and I have different teaching styles. She is more strict, I think, and can be sarcastic. Sometimes I disapprove of the way she treats a student. Maybe she is more knowledgeable about a child's temperament . . . I don't know which of us is right. Anyway, I don't think there is any 'right' way of teaching, because if there was, NIE would surely have made us memorize it.

Gaps between NIE coursework and school practice

1) It seems that for English everything is to be done by the book. They don't emphasize activities like Directed Reading and Thinking Activities (DRTA) and Shared Book Reading (SBR). I'm afraid that my lesson plans may clash with their teaching schemes and aims. As my social studies CT has said, they are exam-oriented and bent on finishing the syllabus by drilling ideas into the students' heads with lots of practice. How do I incorporate the ideas we learnt at NIE when we're to follow our CT's style of teaching so that we don't mess up what they'd planned and upset them? For social studies I have no problem because my CT lets me have the freedom to do what I want. We even share ideas learnt at NIE with the other teachers.

2) Today I am very confused. The methods of my CT are totally different from our training. We were taught not to separate grammar, vocabulary and comprehension but to teach these as one. But my CT divides her lessons into reading time, grammar, vocabulary and comprehension. And she seldom uses the text. I am really in a dilemma. Should I use DRTA method or her method? Using the DRTA the children will be taught to think, whereas using her method will produce immediate results.

3) In NIE we are taught to be innovative, to train their thinking skills, whereas in the real school it is the results that matter. It is usually through rote learning that the average students will do well in their work. For the above average students,

they are bright enough to apply what they learn to new things. Should we expect the average student to struggle with their schoolwork? Thinking skills require a long time to acquire but exams are a yearly thing.

4) My cooperating teachers certainly do not believe in the methods that NIE taught. They still believe in product rather than process. My English CT makes her Primary 2 girls do Primary 3 grammar exercises when some of them cannot even read simple sentences. She says she does not want to waste time on things like shared book lessons. She told me that she has to make sure her girls will pass their exams or else the principal will be unhappy.

5) One thing I have noticed straight from the first day of teaching practice was how theories of teaching crash with actual practice in the school. My CT drills the students in grammar rules and gives them exercises to do for homework. I keep thinking about whether I should drill the students, using exercises and worksheets, or if I should use creative methods to make the concepts meaningful to them. I brought this question to my cooperating teacher, who told me that I would see for myself when I had more experience in our education system. But I don't believe that teachers should give up on creative ways of making the concepts meaningful, even within the system. As teachers, we need to be more student-minded than syllabus-minded. We are called teachers because we have students.

6) During teaching practice I have been unable to even try some of the methods I learned at NIE because of time constraints and pressure from the school. I feel helpless and wonder why I'm being taught theories and methods that I cannot apply. What will happen when I graduate and go out to teach? Will I have to carry on making the same mistakes the older generation makes and then pass them on to the younger ones? My lecturers at NIE have given me ideals which I thought were inspiring but they were all trashed by the realities.

7) At NIE we are taught to be creative when conducting a lesson and that lessons should not be teacher centred but should involve a lot of classroom participation. Lessons should be more than rote learning. However I cannot practice this way of teaching because my cooperating teacher is not comfortable with having activities in class. During my observations of her teaching, I did not see a lesson where she held a group discussion or planned any activities that were not in the teacher's handbook. She did not make her own supplementary materials for her class but instead she took them from another teacher and gave them to her class. Her advice to me was "complete these worksheets by the end of the week." When I showed her my lesson plans she shook her head and said, "Don't waste time doing this. Just get them to do the worksheets." However I did manage to try out some of the activities I had planned and the results were encouraging. The students enjoyed the lesson and more importantly they learnt something a different way, not by rote learning.

8) The principal has asked us to submit all the children's workbooks and files so that she can check the way we have marked their work. Now there is a mad chase to collect worksheets, check corrections, and catch up with marking so that everything can be submitted. I feel more like a clerk than a teacher. My job here is not to help children learn but to breathe down every kid's neck to see that his or her work is turned in and then spend hours marking exercise books. My sense of satisfaction in this job is (temporarily, I hope) missing in action.

9) The lack of time is immensely pressurizing as my CTs and the school emphasize a lot on the scheme of work which is very compact. What I hear around me are things like "How did you manage to teach so fast?" and "Where have you reached? Wait for me, okay?" The emphasis here is not on education but a competition among teachers to complete the worksheets as fast as possible.

Conclusion

These journal entries give us a sense of how practice teachers see their own roles and those of the teachers with whom they work. They also reveal practice teachers' concerns about developing appropriate methods of classroom management and applying what they have learned at the National Institute of Education to real Singaporean classrooms. These insights into the practice teaching experience can help those of us responsible for pre-service training at universities and in-school training through practice teaching develop

programmes and strategies to better meet the needs of our pre-service teachers.

Perhaps then we would see more narrative accounts like this:

Some of the second year trainees warned me that when I went for teaching practice I would find teachers using traditional methods and emphasizing rote learning in the classroom, but when I observed Mrs. Chong, who has been teaching since before I was born, I found the most modern methods taught in NIE being applied. She has not only gone through the various courses but has internalized the theories that were covered and uses them to guide her teaching. She taught me how to apply what I've learnt at NIE and led me to discover the usefulness of it. She taught me the importance of instilling discipline as a foundation before actual teaching could proceed. She taught me to vary my teaching style to cater to the needs of different students. She guided me as a fellow colleague, encouraging me in my teaching, pointing out my mistakes and giving suggestions on how to rectify them, and guiding me in choosing appropriate resources for lesson planning. She went out of her way to help me adjust to life in the school.

I discovered that being a CT is like being given an extra workload with no benefits, but Mrs. Chong didn't treat it as a burden. In fact, she gave her very best to be as good at being a CT as she was at

everything else. I never thought that I would actually enjoy teaching, but I now consider teaching to be my profession, not just a stepping stone to another career. I have talked to other trainees who had uncaring CTs who could not be bothered to give them the help and support they needed. These trainees now have a strong desire to finish their bonds as soon as possible and get out of the teaching profession.